

SUGH TERRACOTTA WITH BRAHMI BARAKHADI

The terracotta in question was collected as a surface find by the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, Panjab University, Chandigarh, in the course of its excavation operations during the winter of 1965 at the early historical site of Sugh, ancient Srughna not far from Jagadhri in the Ambala District, now within Haryana.

The toy (pl. VII) was found in a damaged condition. Its head is altogether missing, and so is much of the right side of the upper part of its body. Yet, what remains of it is sufficient for us to reconstruct the original theme: a tiny tot of a school boy, sitting naked on the floor in a studious fashion, his wooden writing-board or *takhtī* in lap, proudly pointing, with the pointing finger of his right hand, to his well performed writing exercise, showing off, at the same time, his triple jingling ornaments of beaded anklets (*nupuras*), bracelets (*tanikaras*) and waist-band (*mekhalā*). We only miss his facial expression. The skill of the modeller who fashioned this schoolboy toy, in his very natural pose, is simply admirable. The floor area is marked off by a floral design, consisting of traditional symbols of *śrīvatsa* and *padma*, alternating. Both of them are auspicious and sacred to Viṣṇu. From this as well as from other considerations my friend, Mr. C. Sivaramamurti, Director, National Museum, New Delhi, concludes that the figure represents *Kṛishṇa* as a child at the *Dīptiśālā* in the hermitage of his teacher, Sāṅdīpani, at Avantipura.

It is the writing-board with the peculiar writing on it that invests this terracotta with supreme importance. This the student of Indian epigraphy alone can fully appreciate. The type of writing-board represented on our piece, it may be observed, continues to be in use to this day in primary schools

and *pāṭhśālās* throughout India. And our piece, it may be borne in mind, is more than two thousand years old; for, it belongs to the Śuṅga period (c. 185 B.C.).

The style and the texture of the toy once proclaim its age. This is fully borne out by the script on the writing-board. As a matter of fact, this script alone is evidence enough to ascribe the piece to that remote age. It is obviously Brāhmī of that period. It may be recalled that the earliest decipherable palaeography in India begins with Brāhmī that is represented in the famous edicts of the Maurya Emperor Aśoka, engraved on natural rocks and on monolithic pillars, scattered all over India. The script on our terracotta toy is thus Brāhmī in its initial stages of formation and development. It does not materially differ from the Brāhmī of the Maurya period.

So much for the script. Now, what exactly is written on the writing-board? What are the contents of this writing? Well, it is what is called in Sanskrit *Dṛṇḍasikharī*, now commonly known in Hindi and allied Indian languages, in its corrupt form, as *Bārākhadī*, meaning 'a group of twelve letters of the alphabet.' And these twelve letters are all the vowels plus the *anuvāra* and the *visargas* (the former being represented by a dot or a circle *over* a letter, and the latter by two dots or two circles, one *above* the other, *after* a letter): *a ā i ī u ū e o r au an aḥ*. On the writing-board, every one of the four lines of the writing contains these twelve letters, namely ten initial vowels plus the *anuvāra* and the *visargas*, each added to an initial *a*. It is true that each of the four lines cannot be read fully and clearly; but by comparing one line with the others we ultimately arrive at the complete *Bārākhadī*, as given above. In



VII. A child learning the alphabet, second century B.C., Sunga, Sugh, Haryana.

other words, if one letter is not clear in one line it is clear in another.

It may be seen that the initial vowels *ri ri ri* are conspicuous here by their absence. And this is what is most significant of our toy. It proves beyond doubt now what such an eminent authority on Indian palaeography as George Bühler, in his work on *Indian Palaeography* (English translation by John Faithfull Fleet, Calcutta reprint, 1959, pages 16-17), tried to prove on the evidence of certain Jaina and Buddhist sources; namely that these four originally did not figure among the vowels in Sanskrit. Their inclusion among the vowels is of a later date. It is also admitted by Sanskrit grammarians that these additional vowels possess elements more of consonants than of vowels. This can be illustrated by the following stanza where the *sandhi* in *n=atko rishir*=makes the point clear :

*tarko=pratishṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā
n=atko rishir=yasya vachāḥ pramāṇam
dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām
mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*

Coming back to the terracotta figurine, it may be pointed out that the Gandhara art has quite a few stone sculptures in which the Buddha as a child Bodhisattva, going to school in a ram-cart, along with some of his class-mates, all holding their writing-boards and ink-pots, is depicted.¹ In the present case, we may accept Mr. Sivaramamurti's view : the child shown with a writing-board in lap represents the baby Krishna, unless a more convincing identification is forthcoming.

The importance of learning the alphabet at school as the very first step has all along been recognised. We have references to that effect in ancient literature of India, be

it Brahmanistic, Buddhist or Jaina.² The most outstanding allusion of this nature is perhaps the one in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, III, 28 :

*sa vṛtta-chūḷas=chala-kākapakshakair—
amātya-putraiḥ sa-vayobhir-anvitaḥ
liper-yathāvad-grahanena vāṇmayam
nadī-mukhen-eva samudram-āviśat*

This speaks of the child prince, Raghu, acquiring learning : as a child, accompanied by his class-mates of equally tender age, who were the sons of his father's ministers, with their tufts-of-hair-near-the-ear fluttering-Raghu also having the same, as he had just then got his hair-clipping ceremony done-he went to school where he started his schooling : having first mastered the script he thereby acquired mastery of all the scriptures and literature as one enters on the high seas through the mouth of a river. In other words, the mastery of the script is the first step towards the mastery of all the learning.

In fine, it may be added that the present terracotta toy, being of all India importance, has since been presented by the Panjab University to the Government of India and, as such, is now an exhibit in the National Museum at New Delhi.

—B. Ch. Chhabra

1. Compare, for instance, figure 95 in *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara*, by Sir John Marshall, Cambridge, 1960, p. 75.

2. See, for example, the Buddhist work called *Divyāvadāna*, (edited by E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, Cambridge, 1886), pp. 486 ff., where an interesting story of a baby boy, named Panthaka, being initiated at school, is related. He starts with learning *lipi*, i.e. alphabet.